

Changes Only Slightly

Little Town of Bethlehem

Bethlehem, Jordan, Dec. 17.—On the Plain of Boaz to the east, little Bedouin girls follow the wheat harvesters to glean bits of grain.

Men in flowing headdress trudge along rocky trails from the south accompanied by women, children and baggage.

The whine of reed flutes from distant slopes heralds the passing of lonely shepherds watching their flocks.

Identical scenes might have welcomed the Holy Family on the outskirts of the little town of Bethlehem the day Christ was born.

At the time of Christ's birth Bethlehem was a market town for rural people, especially Bedouins to the east and south. In this respect, the town has not changed.

As long as David's time 900 years before Christ, David's son, Chamaan, built a caravanseri here which served as shelter for Bedouins and their flocks as they moved in and out of town. That

same caravanseri was probably the inn where Joseph and Mary were unable to find lodging. The caravanseri has disappeared but the same kind of Bedouins still come to Bethlehem.

Marked by the typical Arab headdress falling down over the neck and shoulders, the wide-shouldered cloaks and their loping gait, these Bedouins through Bethlehem's streets almost any day. They come in to buy and sell on a meager scale and spend long hours in crude sidewalk cafes sipping thimble-sized cups of bitter Arab coffee.

The market place for these people is an open square paved with flagstones. The grain, rice, vegetables or old clothes for sale are displayed on flat trays on the ground or stacked in crude temporary wooden stalls.

The settled inhabitants of Bethlehem's population number around 10,000, live in a city which still bears the mark of the Crusaders. The overwhelming majority of the population is

Christian; only one Moslem minaret competes with innumerable church spires and domes on Bethlehem's skyline.

These people live in stone houses, many of them with low domes as protection against summer heat and winter rain. Some of their houses date back to Crusader times. Many open into cobblestone streets barely wide enough to accommodate an automobile. The arched gateways and vaulted roofs stretching across streets recall the medieval Europe of the Crusades.

Costumes of the women of Bethlehem bear the Crusader mark. Those who wear traditional dress have long full garments, usually black or dark red, decorated with square stitched red or gold embroidery, usually in the form of a Crusader's cross.

These women wear a headdress found only in Bethlehem and unknown in the rest of Palestine. This is a conical shaped high hat, covered with a large white veil.

When Christ was born the people of Bethlehem lived largely from sheep raising and olive growing. Many live from the same occupation today. Olive groves braced with stone terraces fall away from the edge of the town to the Plain of Boaz below. On the plain wheat is grown. Here Ruth of the Old Testament story gleaned behind the harvesters, just as Bedouin girls do today.

Many Bethlehem inhabitants own flocks of sheep or goats in addition to the land they till. Caring for these sheep dictates a way of life unchanged since the night shepherds on nearby slopes heard angels sing of the new-born King. Shepherds daily leave the town and take their flocks over the same slopes where the angels sang. Sometimes they travel 25 miles in a single day, clambering over the rocky hillsides to find bits of grass and shrubs.

A new element has been added to Bethlehem's population since 1948—Arab refugees from Israel. Driven from their homes by the Arab-Israel war, these people live in the outskirts of the town in tents, hovels, and caves. Many a baby has been born in the past seven years in circumstances similar to those of Jesus—in a grotto shared by animals, placed in a crude wooden crib made by the father.

On Christmas Eve these refugees sit sullenly beside the road watching well-dressed tourists arrive for Christmas ceremonies at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. As there are no European standard hotels in Bethlehem, most tourists stay in Jerusalem. They drive back and forth for the Christmas Eve services which recount the incidents of the day the Holy Family came into a crowded Bethlehem and found "there was no room for them in the inn."

Almost for the first time in history, the shepherds of Bethlehem today have their freedom of movement restricted. Within sight of their town is the military frontier dividing Arab Jordan from the newly created state of Israel. With the war still unsettled shepherds are forbidden to approach the demarcation line, for fear of touching off a frontier incident.

At noon each day shepherds must leave grazing grounds to find water for their flocks. Many visit Solomon's Pools near Bethlehem at midday. In the evening the shepherd carefully counts his flock as it enters the fold, one by one. The fold may be a little stable built by the shepherd. More often it is a limestone grotto, with the entrance practically closed, to admit only one animal at a time.

Bethlehem's status as the birthplace of Christ has given the town a new modern industry—tourism. The otherwise sleepy little town ranks as one of the foremost sites of religious pilgrimage in the world and every year it is visited by thousands of tourists from all continents. It is the center of numerous religious orders and institutions of all types—Catholic, Orthodox, Armenian, and Protestant. The varied dress of friars, priests, nuns, and sisters add to the color of native costumes.

SANTA, INDIANA  
The community of Santa Claus, Indiana owes its fame to its unusual name. At Christmas time its small post office is swamped with mail from throughout the world.



CITY VIEW . . . A towering television tower is framed by a street light whose glow is much like the Star of Bethlehem.

Many modern Bethlehemites make a living carving objects of piety from mother of pearl, Dead Sea Stone and olive wood. These souvenirs, along with embroidered and brocaded Crusaders' jackets are offered for sale in small shops not far from the Church of the Nativity where Christ was born.

The shop-keepers lounge in the sun in the sidewalk cafes, waiting for tourists to arrive at the church. As soon as a tourist arrives—and they are easy to spot—the shop-keepers converge on him in a pack. Each offers his services as a guide. He will show the tourist through the church and all the other Bethlehem sights at no charge.

This offer may sound suspicious, but it is valid. The guide asks no money. At the end of the tour he invites the tourist to his shop for a rest and a cup of coffee or tea—still with no obligation.

Once the visitor is seated the shop-keeper casually calls attention to the souvenirs he has to sell. The tourist is lucky if he can escape without buying.

Business is slow for these people most of the year, but when Christmas comes, Bethlehem's population more than doubles for a few days and souvenir sellers are happy.



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